

Incarnation Questions

Matthew 11:2-11

December 12, 2021

Life is full of disappointments. It is full of “almosts, could haves, and would haves.” There is nothing more disappointing than expecting one thing and receiving something totally different.

Sometimes this happens at Christmas, doesn't it? This season of jolly and happiness can turn out to be very disappointing.

In the Scripture we read this morning, we find John the Baptist in prison and he is looking for a sign, a sign that confirms that the long-awaited Messiah has really come. Isn't it interesting that he is looking for that sign? Isn't he the one who looked at Jesus and proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah? When he saw Jesus, he said, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” He knew Jesus was the Messiah. So, why is he raising this question, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

We may think of it in several different ways. One, John might have been disappointed with Jesus.

Do you remember his message? He said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He wasn't afraid to preach his message to the religious and political leaders alike. He wasn't even afraid to proclaim it to the ruler of the region, Herod Antipas. Actually, that is the reason why he was arrested and ended up in prison.

Herod Antipas took his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, and John the Baptist condemned his behavior. Remember his message was “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In the same line of thought he condemned Herod Antipas' behavior and called for his repentance.

Herod Antipas didn't like that. So, he put him in the prison. Now, sitting in the prison cell, John the Baptist knew that not only his career as a prophet was over but his life was in jeopardy.

There was one thing John wanted to know before he died. He wanted to know for sure that Jesus was truly the Messiah, the one the Israelites had been waiting for. He wanted to know that because he had given everything he had for

that, including his life. His sole purpose in life was to preach that Jesus was the Messiah and that God's kingdom was being established through him.

In the wilderness, John believed that Jesus was the Messiah but now sitting in the prison, in the face of his own death, he began to wonder whether what he believed was really true. Things were not working out the way he expected.

He was a product of his time. He believed what everyone else believed. He expected the same kind of Messiah everyone else expected, the one who would drive out the Romans and establish the Kingdom of God in Israel. But it wasn't happening that way.

Instead of organizing for a military action, Jesus went around preaching, teaching and healing. So John wondered, "Why isn't he doing more? What is Jesus waiting for? Why doesn't he take action and start a revolution?" He was disappointed because he had faulty expectations.

The second reason why he was disappointed was because he was looking for all the wrong signs. When John sent his question to Jesus, "Are you the expected Messiah," Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receives their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. The poor have the message of hope. The day of the Lord has arrived; the kingdom of God has come." But what John was looking for was a political revolution, a military action, not a medical breakthrough.

The third reason why John was disappointed was because he operated with his own timeline rather than God's timeline. John wanted action now.

Don't we all do that? We see some injustice or trouble in our lives and we want God to intervene and we want his action now. We ask for healing, and we want it now. We ask for his guidance and we want it now. We want justice and we want it now but God doesn't work according to our schedule. He works according to his. Sometimes that seems too slow. Nevertheless, he works. He works according to his timeline!

So, I can see why John would be disappointed.

We may look at John's question from his own predicaments. He was in prison and he might die soon. No matter how strong your faith may be, when you face death, there is an element of fear.

Do you know what fear does? It eats away at your confidence – not your self-confidence, but your confidence in everything and everyone. Could this have happened to John?

Even though he had seen the evidence of Jesus' Messiahship, and had heard heaven's claim that "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," in the moment of intense fear, he wondered if this could be really true? "Did I hear it right? Did I see it right?", he wondered. Perhaps his doubt was not directed toward Jesus but toward his own ability to think and reason.

John had risked his life to preach his passionate sermon about repentance. He correctly believed that the only way to prepare for the Kingdom of God would be through repentance. Had he toned it down, had he diluted his message, he would still be out in the wilderness preaching but now in his own situation he is asking "Are you truly the one who is to come?" Perhaps he is asking, "Can I stake my life on you?" "Is it worth risking my life for you?"

Jesus' answer was "The blind see and the lame walk. The lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear. The dead are raised and the poor have the good news." Yes, it is worth risking your life for me because I am the Lord of restoration. You may give up your life now, but it will be restored in glory.

The answer Jesus gave him was the list of examples of miracles that are performed in compassion and empathy. They were the examples of restoration.

What Jesus was saying was that his purpose, his mission was none other than the one of compassion and restoration. Even if you lose your life now, it will be restored in glory in the presence of God the Father.

The power of Jesus is the power of restoration, the power of release. No matter how broken our lives may be, he can restore it, and he will restore it.

This may not be what John anticipated from Jesus. What John expected was the restoration of a nation, the nation of Israel, not the lives of people but the Kingdom of God was much more personal and intimate than what John expected. The essence of Jesus' ministry was to restore our lives and our relationship with our creator. The arrival of the Messiah, however, did not fix all of our problems. It didn't release John from prison. Nevertheless, Jesus came bringing the power of compassion and the power of restoration.

And that ministry of compassion and restoration continues with his disciples.

In the celebration of Passover, there is a tradition of inviting the spirit of Elijah to come. Toward the end of the celebration, they open the door and invite the spirit of Elijah to come in.

There is a story of a pious Jew who asked his rabbi, “I have been celebrating Passover for about 40 years. Each time I have invited Elijah to come but I have never experienced his presence. What is the reason?”

The rabbi said, “In your neighborhood there is a very poor family with many children. Call on the man and propose to him that you and your family celebrate the next Passover at his house. For this purpose you would provide the family with everything necessary for the eight days of Passover (the Feast of Unleavened bread and Passover). If you do that, on the night of Passover, Elijah will certainly come.”

The man did exactly that but after Passover the man came back to the rabbi and said that even with all that, Elijah did not come. The rabbi answered, “I know very well that Elijah came on the Passover night to the house where you celebrated the Seder but of course you could not see him.” “Why couldn’t I see him?” the man asked. The rabbi held a mirror before the face of the man and said, “Look, this was Elijah’s face that night.” What the Rabbi was saying was that the man was the one who was bringing the message of the arrival of the savior.

The ministry of Jesus continues with his followers. The power of compassion and restoration is still being exercised through his disciples.

So John’s question that was directed to Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come?” is now directed toward us. Are you the one who is carrying the ministry of Jesus? Or should we look for someone else?

Are you the one who is exercising the power of Jesus? Or should we look for someone else?

Are you the one who is building the kingdom of God? Or should we look for someone else?

These are the incarnation questions we need to ask ourselves in this season of Christmas.